DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 603 JC 840 213

AUTHOR McGrath, Dennis; Spear, Martin
TITLE A Review of "Literacy in the Open-Access College."
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; For the book under review, see ED 237 125.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Book Reviews; *Community Colleges; *Curriculum Development; Educational Assessment; *Educational Objectives; *Literacy; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *Literacy in the Open Access College

ABSTRACT

A review is provided of "Literacy in the Open-Access College," by Richardson, Fisk, and Okum, from the perspective of community college practitioners involved in curriculum reform. First, introductory information is presented about "Literacy in the Open-Access College," an analysis based on a 3-year ethnographic study of a typical college within a large, multi-campus community college system. The study found that the traditional role of written language in the intellectual formation of students has dropped away without any equivalent form of communication being substituted in the curriculum. The community college, according to Richardson et al, is structured to promote "bitting" (i.e., the use of reading and writing to understand or produce fragmented language when the student is presented with specific external cues) as opposed to "texting" (i.e., the use of reading and writing to comprehend or compose connected language). As such, the college will inevitably produce students with restricted literacy skills who are socialized to conceive of education as a series of experiences in which they are to memorize discrete bits of information. Other topics of the book that are highlighted include: (1) the relationship of the nature of classroom behavior to broad district-level policy decisions; (2) the relationship of classroom practices with the ongoing negotiations taking place between faculty and students; and (3) the downward renegotiation of norms of literate activity. Next, the paper takes issue with the book's conclusions with respect to "bitting" or "texting" policy alternatives, arguing that an understanding of the trend toward "bitting" in curricula should be based on an analysis of how the culture has come to represent education to itself and how that conception has become embedded in society's institutions; and suggesting methods of reconceptualizing the functions of education to truly democratize higher education. (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED258603

A Review of
Literacy in the Open-Access College

Dennis McGrath, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of
Sociology and Director,
Transfer Education Program
Community College of Philadelphia

Martin Spear, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of
Philosophy and Director,
Honors Program
Community College of Philadelphia

March, 1984

JC 840 213

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. McGrath
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Dick Richardson and his associates in their Literacy in the Open-Access College raise a number of critical questions about community college education that are of particular relevance to those of us involved in curriculum reform.[1] Based on a three year ethnographic study of a typical college within a large, multi-campus community college system, given the pseudonym "Oakwood," their analysis raises issues of the broadest concern. For they demonstrate that community colleges have lost their way in the sense that they are unable to articulate a clear sense of mission and then relate that vision to organizational structure and curriculum.

Like all fine ethnographies their work offers important insights by pro-viding novel perspectives on seemingly familiar settings. The "shock of recognition" that Richardson and his colleagues produce is achieved thr-ough a focus on the role of literacy in the curriculum and the way in which students are shaped and prepared for future academic and occupational careers. Pointing to the traditional role of written language in the intellectual formation of students, they assert that as these forms of language usage have dropped away no new equivalent form of communication has been substituted in the curriculum.

This point is forcefully made in their argument that if we are to offer our students realistic hopes for a decent future in the emerging economy, if we are to prepare them to compete effectively for professional, managerial or technical jobs, then they will have to acquire the ability to critically and expressively utilize language. However, the fundamental conclusion of their

---

[1] Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Elizabeth C. Fisk and Morris A. Okum, Literacy in the Open-Access College (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983).

analysis is that community colleges, in the most basic ways that they structure their curriculum and administrative activities, prohibit the cultivation of these skills. The community college, in their vocabulary, is structured to promote "bitting" defined as the use of reading and writing to understand or produce fragmented language when the student is presented with specific external cues. This they contrast with "texting" understood as the use of reading and writing to comprehend or compose connected language.

What is perhaps most useful for those of us engaged in designing new programs for students is their attempt to describe the very nature of the contemporary community college. For what emerges from their study is a much clearer sense of how the ways in which students and teachers experience the college at the classroom level is related to what the college as an organization is designed for.

A college structured to promote "bitting" will inevitably produce certain types of students, those with restricted literacy skills and socialized to conceive education as a series of experiences in which they are to memorize discrete bits of information. Such a college is conceived as a bureaucratic machine dedicated to the continual rationalization of the educational process, utilizing an educational technology most powerfully signalled by the insistence on the jargon of behavioral objectives, which break student transformations into ever more discrete pieces. The power of the analysis really resides in the implicit recommendation that program change must be explicitly related to an alteration in institutional self-characterization, especially as it affects the norms of literate behavior which are actually embodied in the classroom and which reflect our highest hopes for our students.

The book is most provocative in the number of "stories" that are told in the attempt to understand how these norms of literate activity come to be established. One narrative traces the nature of classroom behavior to broad policy decisions at the district level, and the manner in which these policies were translated into specific organizational goals at individual campuses. Once a decision was made to expand enrollment, the number of underprepared students entering the college placed great stress on the existing curriculum and services. Attempts to reduce costs through a greater reliance on part-time faculty reduced control over the curriculum. This story concludes in faculty members reducing their demands on students rather than in requiring them to improve their skills.

This plot line intersects with a second narrative which more fully relates classroom practices to the ongoing negotiations that take place between faculty and students. This story is told primarily through a focus on the relationship between instructional styles and methods and the learning strategies of students. The rich complexity of actual behavior is simplified through a series of typologies that the authors construct, but the main outline of the story emerges nonetheless.

Students, whose "motivational orientations" they characterize as largely that of "requirement meeters" and "specific or non-specific information users" enroll in courses taught primarily by faculty whose pedagogical objectives are the limited cognitive objectives of information dissemination. As the average level of academic preparedness and interest of the students declines, the faculty, committed to a particular instructional styles, that of the classroom

lecture, and the limited instructional goal of "information transfer" respond by simply watering down the requirements. They both "transfer" less complex information to the students via lectures and demand much less literate behavior from the students by replacing term papers and essays, for instance, with check marks on multiple-choice exams. The consequences for the institution are that the norms of literate activity are renegotiated downward, ultimately altering the entire intellectual climate of the school.

In startling contrast to the prejudices of the traditional academic faculty, we find the most praised, and indeed the most amiable characters in the story to be found in the basic language skills courses and the vocational labs. These seemingly quite dissimilar segments of the curriculum turn out to be alike in an important way. In both cases the norms of literate activity have been renegotiated as students and teachers are brought closer together in an attempt to achieve identifiable and generally shared goals. Since both faculty and students are generally committed to the same ends there is added motivation to demand more of each other and to find ways to teach and learn effectively.

Set against the larger narrative of the construction of a bureaucratic machine designed to break learning down into "bite size" components that are easily memorized and repeated, the close contact and shared activity of students and teachers in the basic skills and vocational lab courses becomes quite aplealing. They also raise the broader question of how classroom norms can be renegotiated throughout the entire institution.

When they turn to the question of institutional change, though, Richardson and his colleagues pose the policy alternatives in relatively stark terms as illustrated in the table taken from their book. As one can see, the commitment to either "bitting" or "texting" leads to quite different institutions. We find the formulation valuable for sharpening debate, but take exception with it on several points.

One is that although their major concern is with the norms of literate behavior that are institutionalized in classroom practices, the instrument for influencing such norms are exclusively administrative policies and procedures. This is a somewhat curious conclusion, but it can be better understood when it is related to their analysis of the community college.

While there are several different stories of "Oakwood's" transformation, the major narrative is an institutional and administrative one. The administrative priority that the new chancellor placed on access and growth was quickly translated into institutional policies which greatly expanded the number of nontraditional students. However, this policy shift occurred without a concomitant attempt to alter the curriculum or redefine program standards or the types of support services most needed by those students. Since they view the decline in literacy as resulting from administrative decisions the suggested policy alternatives are framed in similar terms. But the question still remains as to whether the educational practices embedded in the average class can be so clearly traced to specific institutional policies. Or, put another way, are policies and procedures, as important as they are, the only way administrators and faculty can communicate about educational goals?

A second, and related, concern is the restrictive nature of the "texting" alternative. As an examination of the table shows, "texting" is primarily achieved through a more selective admissions and program eligibility policy. Although Richardson and his group are quite sensitive to the role of access in the community college mission, they suggest the need to shift toward restriction in a time of shrinking public resources.

This stark formulation of the policy alternatives must also be related to the details of their analysis. As their historical sketch of the college and district shows, the chancellor's new priorities never gained the commitment of the faculty. While the senior administration promoted innovation and the attraction of new clientele, the faculty retained their primary commitment to traditional students and traditional methods. This lack of agreement both undermined administrative authority and eroded faculty morale while styming attempts to develop effective working relationships.

The policy alternatives associated with "bitting" and "texting" can be seen as shaped in part by the varying perspectives of senior administrators and faculty members. Bitting, in its most fully developed form, expresses a self-characterization of an institution completely dedicated to growth, access and the most efficient allocation of resources. Texting is closer to the faculty desire to sustain some of the traditional ideals of the liberal arts and their concern that the institution recruit the type of students they are most prepared to teach. Seen in this way the choice between bitting and texting is another expression of the fact that community colleges have lost their way and require a new educational vision which can be expressed in their curriculum and organizational structure.

Richardson's analysis has already generated much admiration and controversy, calling attention as it does to the long standing and tacitly held assumption that administrative and policy decisions are mostly neutral to the actual classroom experience of teachers and students. Still, one might reasonably ask how strong the relation they have uncovered really is, whether the correlations chart causes or whether those correlations themselves reveal deeper cultural influences. To sharpen that question just a bit, why should it be, for instance, that the rationalization of the curriculum should be even imaginable as a mere collection of discrete, self-contained and largely self-legitimated three credit courses? Why should student/teacher negotiations have taken the form of movement away from literacy and toward memorization? Why should even literacy be spoken of as a set of skills culminating at the highest level as the ability to "analyse" (break into bits) and/or "synthesize" (build out of bits)? We believe that the answer to these questions can only be that the educational establishment is deeply committed to the largely unarticulated view that education consists primarily in the acquiring of knowledge and that knowledge is best understood as information. The prevalence of that standard epistemology is exhibited in Richardson's typologies of both student motivation and teaching styles, each of which lines up primarily with respect to questions of the utility of information. We suggest, then, that a deeper understanding of what drives curricula down the "bitting" path would include an ethnography of knowledge, an analysis of how we as a culture have come to represent education to ourselves and how that conception becomes embedded in our institutions.

Associated with the reading of knowledge as information, for instance, is the fairly standard opposition of knowledge with values or attitudes. That

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

dichotomy, however, proves to be a blunt instrument with which to understand the rich differences the team uncovered between the regular academic program, the vocational programs and the developmental courses. The standard typology forces the analysis to be run in terms of the coincidence of faculty and student goals whereas the mere description of the program activities seems to suggest much more strongly that the practices of the classroom or the shop form students as practitioners or as citizens. The implication for the academic classroom are devastating. Unless knowledge and values occupy conceptually perfectly insulated real ms, as the positivists would have had us believe, the attempt to force that model onto education, or the pretence that classroom and other educational activities are "value neutral" does more than fuel a beneficient pluralism; it allows us, practically forces us, to take students who are unformed by academic standards, who have never learned the standard set of academic norms, attitudes, and behaviors, and insist that that fact about them doesn't matter since, after all, knowledge and the method of acquiring knowledge is neutral with respect to their cultural ensemble.

Probably, Literacy in the Open-Access College is the community college book of the eighties; it will provide the terms of the conversation in which policy issues will be discussed for the next several years. Aside from the explicit policy forks it presents, practitioners at all levels within community colleges will find dark implications for their enterprise. But they will also find a vocabulary in which to express the crisis and a theoretical framework in which to couch the burgeoning twin movement for staff development and curriculum reform--wherein lies the hope we have of keeping alive the dream of the democratization of higher education.

Table 2. Promoting Critical Literacy: Policy Alternatives.

Policy Area	*"Bitting" Less Use of Critical Literacy*	*"Texting" More Use of Critical Literacy*
Admission and Placement	Recruit actively. Seek new clientele. Admit all who apply, with enrollment permitted in any course for which there is no quota (for example, nursing).	Recruit selectively. Admit all who apply with high school equivalency, with enrollment limited to courses that match student reading, writing, and math skills.
Financial Assistance	Keep all students eligible for as much assistance as possible for as long as possible through credit for basic skills, liberal interpretation of regulations, and easy withdrawal policies.	Limit eligibility to students making defined progress toward a degree or certificate according to some acceptable time frame.
Educational Program	Design program to offer "all things to all people." Seek to emphasize community rather than college. Avoid setting priorities.	Limit to programs and courses that can be offered at a defined level of quality within the limits of existing or probable resources. Emphasize degree-oriented occupational or transfer programs.
Course Designations	Label courses to maximize funding potential. Place burden on transfer institutions and state agencies to disprove course status.	Label courses according to the objectives and academic experience of those for whom they are designed.
Program for Remediation	Emphasize courses and services described as developmental and administered by a separate unit. Include goals such as socialization having equal status with the remediation of academic deficiencies.	Emphasize remedial courses in academic skill areas administered by related departments. May include support services such as tutoring and study skills courses.
Promotion of Academic Progress	Facilitate continuing enrollment by liberal withdrawal regulations and nonpunitive grading. Define achievement as grade-point average for courses completed and surveys of student satisfaction, as well as reports on selected individuals.	Require students to qualify for regular status in a degree or certificate program within some limited and specific period of time. Require defined progress toward achieving educational objectives. Define achievements as completion of defined sequence with minimum grade-point average in required courses. Use standardized or teacher developed examinations of academic achievement.
Faculty Conditions	Use part-time instructors extensively as a strategy for expanding services despite resource constraints. The ratio of full-time faculty to students justifies neglect of advisement and orientation procedures.	Limit use of part-time instructors to the coverage of enrollment fluctuations or where necessary skills cannot be obtained in a full-time faculty member. Full-time instructors expected to provide sound student advisement.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges

AUG 16 1985